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Contributors

MORSE PECKHAM, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, has contributed to the Publication of the Modern Language Association. JOE COOGAN was introduced to readers of **FOUR QUARTERS** last year through his stories "Double Skull, Slow Burn, and a Ping" and "The Torch that Aristotle Dropped." BRONISLAW SLAWECKI, whose poem "The Poet's Lament" appeared in our January issue, is a student at La Salle College. CHRISTINE TURNER CURTIS is introduced through her poem "Timing." JAMES KRITZECK, a member of the Society of Fellows of Harvard University, makes his first contribution to **FOUR QUARTERS**, the poem "Preface to a Closet Play." CLAUDE F. KOCH, DAN RODDEN, and AUSTIN J. APP are members of the staff of **FOUR QUARTERS**.

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Typographic Cover Design by Joseph Mintzer

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Is Poetry Self-Expression?

● By Morse Peckham

TRADITIONALLY, the problem of whether or not poetry is self-expression has been attacked by an analysis of "expression"; that is, behind such analyses lies the assumption that the "self" is an entity, and in this sense such theories about poetry have the characteristics of metaphysical thinking. In the nineteenth century, men like Newman and Ruskin expressed in various parts of their writings the typical idea of that century—the idea which still dominates most thinking on the problem. In these terms, the poem is thought of as a kind of window between the inner and the outer world. And in Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott," the picture of the lady weaving her designs from what she has seen in the mirror, which reflects reality, is an allegorical visual image of the nineteenth century's idea of relationship of the poet to reality: The poet is conceived of as living within the inner world of the "self"; and when the poet leaves that inner world and moves into the outer world, he is, as a poet, destroyed.

This window into the soul (or the "self") has, of course, also the dimension of time, and, consequently, the poem is thought of as a record of experience. This being so, the relationship of the reader to the poet is that of someone who relives or recreates the experience, which was originally lived by the poet and which is recorded in the poem. It may be said that this has led, possibly, to a misunderstanding of nineteenth century poetry, the dramatic fiction of which is that it is a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions, a record of experience; but this, it may be, is only dramatic fiction and really has no relevance to what actually happens in both the reading and the writing of the poem.

As we have seen, this kind of thinking posits the "self" as an entity. What I would like to do is to take three propositions which are accepted by some people at the present time, and apply them to this problem of poetry as self-expression. Primarily, my attack will not be upon "expression" but upon "self." These propositions, as variously expressed, can be presented in the following way: First, metaphysical language is without "meaning"; that is, metaphysical linguistic structure is not the same kind of linguistic structure as a scientific linguistic structure. It is not cognitive language. Second, the "self" is not an entity and the word does not refer to an entity the existence of which can be empirically verified. This, however, does not mean (as I shall shortly try to explain) that when we use the word "self" we are not talking about anything at all. The third proposition has been, perhaps, most strikingly set forth by Beardsley and Wimsatt in their famous "The Intentional Fallacy." This proposition is that in reading the poem we must assume that the spokesman of the poem is not to be identified with the author and that we go from spokesman to author by an act of biographi-

cal inference. If my analysis is correct in stating that to posit the "self" is to use metaphysical language and not, loosely, scientific or cognitive language, we can dispose of the proposition that a poem is self-expression in the sense that something inside the "self" goes out into or is projected upon, or is reflected in, something outside the "self"; namely, the poem. Because if this is metaphysical language it is meaningless language. But can we say that we are not talking about anything at all when we speak of poetry as self-expression? I think if properly understood the term does yield something. Psychology has taught us that the root of emotional life lies in the sense of identity, which apparently begins to emerge about the age of two. It is possible, for example, that the fear of heights or the fear of death is not a real fear in the sense that it is a recognition of a real threat to existence but is, rather, a fear not of death or of heights but of loss of identity, which is so hardly won and which is maintained with such difficulty.

Now if we examine the actual behavior of people, we find that it is an inconsistent and discontinuous mixture of conscious and unconscious reactions to a storm of ever-differing, constantly changing phenomena. Further, analysis shows us that each person has a self-portrait which is a construct (or a selection on the basis of models learned from the society) from all of the individual's bits and pieces of behavior, one which does not correspond to the full range of behavior. This self-portrait is, in itself, inconsistent, but it does have a certain kind of structure; that is, each person lives according to a predominating role. It is only a madman, though, such as the man who imagines himself to be Napoleon, who maintains an absolutely consistent and fixed self-portrait and acts according to it. The healthy person is constantly changing his self-portrait and actually has at his control a wide range of roles and differing self-portraits, which he can adopt as the situation demands. It is, perhaps, something of this sort that was in Yeats' mind when he developed his doctrine of masks.

Now if, from the behavior of the individual, we isolate his linguistic behavior, we will observe that it has all the characteristics of the self-portrait; that is, it lacks logical structure and is adapted to a wide range of varying roles. In this sense, we might almost say that every sentence an individual utters in normal life in social relationships reflects a slightly different role, and, sometimes, a profoundly different role. It is immediately apparent that there are certain kinds of linguistic behavior which have, for instance, the characteristic of logical structure. There is, of course, at the present time, a profound disagreement on what logic is and its relationship to reality (or what lies outside of the structure which includes signs which point or refer to something outside the structure) and even on the origin of logic. But this disagreement need not affect the argument. All that is necessary is to accept the proposition that a series of sentences organized according to logical structure is a unique and special kind of linguistic organization, of which we cannot say much except that it has

that strange quality known as structure and that it is a linguistic activity profoundly different from ordinary linguistic behavior.

Poetry also has structure—in rhythm, in rhyme, in stanzaic organization, and for some poetry, in symbolic organization, as well as in the organization of images. The various kinds of poetic structure have not, so far as I know, been carefully distinguished or even recognized. One of the reasons of this critical lack lies in the very assumption that the whole poem is thought of as a sign with reference to the “self.” But if, as we have seen, the “self” is not an entity, we can scarcely have a sign which points to it. Furthermore, this structure of poetry is like logical structure, a most untypical or anormal kind of linguistic behavior.

Certain words which are used by both reader and writer gives us a hint of what is going on in the poetic activity of either. The poet speaks of inspiration from a source outside of his “self.” He often speaks the way the reader speaks; that is, he will say he loses himself in the activity of poetic creation. For many people with a somewhat naive tendency, this is, in fact, their single esthetic test—they lose themselves in reading the poem or in looking at the play or the movie, or in reading the novel. This is the equivalent of what the poet calls “inspiration.”

What could they possibly be talking about? I think it is something like this: Like the man who thinks himself to be Napoleon, they experience, for the time being, a consistent role. Their linguistic behavior is organized according to the structure of a role and does not, as it does in ordinary life, skip rapidly from one role to another. The teacher, for instance, experiences something like acting: During the time of his teaching performance, he acts according to a certain pre-existent model or pattern of “the teacher.”

Perhaps, to digress a moment, the more conscious he is of the difference between this role and his ordinary self-portrait, the better the teacher he is; just as we, I think rightly, make a distinction between the acting of Tallulah Bankhead, who seems to confuse art and life, and that of a disciplined artist, such as Helen Hayes. When we say, then, that a poem is self-expression, do we not mean, rather, that through its linguistic structure it is the creation of a temporarily consistent “self”? The implications of this are really very great. For it means that a poet can achieve an understanding and an acceptance or rejection of a particular emotional attitude which he cannot practice in life. In Swinburne’s “Anactoria,” we have a complete description by Sappho of masochistic love, which arouses her to a fury of aggressive verbalization. And an analysis of the poem shows us, in the flight of Venus from the Isle of Lesbos, that Swinburne is saying that this kind of love is a wrong kind of love; yet in his own life he was never able to solve that problem, and he could get along only by submitting himself to the control of the ineffable Watts-Dunton. In the traditional kind of biographical criticism, the poem would be taken as proof that Swinburne had solved this problem; or else, working from Swinburne to the poem, it would be taken as an expression of Swinburne’s

emotional life, and it would be said that the poem does not imply that this kind of love is a failure. And, indeed, this has been done by several English critics in recent years, one of whom has rejected Swinburne wholesale on the grounds that his poetry is the expression of a neurotic "self." If my analysis of the situation is correct, however, it will be seen that Swinburne was capable of understanding, describing and rejecting an emotion which dominated his whole life. Obviously, to move from a poem directly to the emotional life of the author is an act of biographical inference which cannot be justified.

Psychologically, then, we can say that the function of the creation or of reading of a poem is to give us relief from our continuous struggle to maintain the sense of identity. It is the kind of relief which children have on Hallowe'en. By dressing up they create an image of themselves which is the basis for a self-portrait according to which they can act with emotional consistency for a few hours. It is for this reason that poetry can be so profoundly moving, and it is for this reason that we can give content to the proposition made by I. A. Richards (among others) that a poem is the organization of emotional attitudes or of the emotional life. To relate images which have emotional significance or color or suffusion is to organize and relate the emotions themselves; the varying effects of one emotional attitude upon another are thus, for the time being, made consistent and structured and, consequently, have "meaning." The true psychological function, then, of poetry is to give us the experience of maintaining identity. The more profoundly, the more richly we have this experience, the more successful we will be in creating this sense of identity. Poetry, then, is one of the healthiest of human activities, and it is not surprising that its particular appeal should be strongest to those people who, for whatever reasons, are especially aware, perhaps unconsciously, of the difficulties that lie in the way of the struggle for identity.

Finally, then, we can say that the task of criticism is not, as it has usually been in the past, to find out something in the poet's life to which the signs within the poem point, but rather to discover whether or not the poem has a consistent structure. To find out whether it has or has not a consistent structure will require the development of techniques which are yet scarcely in existence or even thought of, except by a very few critics, who are studying structure because they have arrived by intuition at the realization that the study of linguistic structure of the poem is the important task of criticism. Perhaps a development of a true criticism will involve the development of a meta-language; that is, a special limited language whose signs will refer to the structure of poetry and not to anything that lies outside of that structure. Furthermore, the acceptance of this proposition must involve a reconsideration of the portraits of the "selves" of poets which biographers have created over the past several hundred years. At the same time, this kind of thinking sheds considerable light on the problem of why individual biographers extract from a consideration of poems and of

non-literary biographical data such differing and inconsistent pictures, such as, on the one hand, making Shelley a completely aimless and irresponsible neurotic, and on the other hand, making him a human being with aim and direction and a steadily growing sense of identity and a steadily growing responsibility towards himself, his family and friends, and society as a whole.

To conclude, the poem is not self-expression. It is the creation of a "self" or a role which temporarily gives the writer and the reader a continuous sense of identity, a sense traditionally-called inspiration. The term, self-expression, therefore, should be dropped from the critical vocabulary as essentially meaningless and metaphysical, and in its place we should try to create a meta-language which will explore and describe the various kinds of poetic structure.

The Maker

● Bronislaw Slaweki

He smiled away their praise and laudation,
Dismissing his work with a careless wave.
"I fitted merely some old slats together,
Refurbishing them so they seemed to have
The careless precision of virgin stock.

It was carelessness really, the weather
Warped the woof of the wood (because of my
neglect) and some of my calculations
Were off. Who knows? if the heavy iron block
Had not fallen on it, the appealing
Line of the top might never have been shaped."

And when he turned his back they laughed, feeling
Amongst themselves his subtle humor (draped
with modesty); and winked and called him sly.

Steena and the Divine Fire

● Joe Coogan

STEENA GALLAGHER is a genius. She is a short plump girl in her early thirties and wears her sparse red hair pulled back in a tightly rolled bun. Thick tortoise-shell glasses shield her pale blue eyes, and her rather sallow complexion is not unfreckled. Steena is not beautiful in the Hollywood sense of the word.

Although she is ten years older than I am, I've known Steena ever since she was the slight, sober-faced little criterion of ladyhood that lived next door to us in Philadelphia. Even in grammar school, she showed indications of latent brilliance and evidenced remarkable facility in sketching and composition. When she was in high school, Steena never had a date. While my older sister was greatly preoccupied with raucous yellow-slickered youths, Steena preferred to sit at home reading the classics. And when as the Senior class valedictorian she read an original thirty-three stanzaed blank verse on the Future of Democracy, everyone knew Steena was going places. The world will never realize the loss it sustained when this bright gem-like flame was so prematurely extinguished.

Until last summer I hadn't seen Steena for quite some time. Old Mrs. Gallagher died when I was in Prep School, and Steena went to New York to take a job in an advertising firm. After leaving school, I had been inducted into the Army

and after a gruelling two years in a Texas Special Service office I had doffed the killer's garb and enrolled in a beginners' course in magazine illustration at the New York Art Students League.

One bright summer night I was returning from class, sunk in that black depression so familiar to creative minds. I was worried (how foolishly I now realize) because during a slight altercation between myself and my instructor he had hinted that I was completely lacking in talent. "You're completely lacking in talent," was the way he put it. I was walking swiftly with head bowed, reviewing the distasteful scene, when I bumped into Steena Gallagher.

"Charles," she said, "little Charles Cunningham."

"Steena! I didn't recognize you."

"I guess I have changed a little."

She had. She was wearing aquamarine blue slacks, a short white polo jacket, and had a red beret perched precariously on top of her head.

"What are you doing in New York, Charles?"

"Going to Art School," I said. "I've been studying magazine illustration." She shook her head sadly.

"Do you really like painting like Norman Rockwell?"

"No," I said, "but I need the money."

"And how are you progressing?"

"I'm afraid I'm not doing very well."

"Good!"

"Good?"

"Good." She leaned closer to me. "Charles," she said, "I've often thought you were inherently artistic. Maybe you're not successful in attempting this mediocre commerciality because you're too good." Her voice became throaty. "Maybe—maybe you're touched with the Divine Fire!" Maybe I was.

"I can't tell you," she continued, "how glad I am that we met. Illustration. Illustration indeed!"

"Illustration indeed!" I said. I was feeling better already.

"There are much higher aims in Art than mere achievement of the banal."

"Much higher," I said.

"But it takes courage, fire, and genius."

"Fire and genius." I agreed.

"And you're the one that can do it!"

"I'm the one," I said.

"Perhaps!"

"Perhaps?"

"There is always the possibility that your instructor may be right. You may not have the talent."

"Oh."

"And then, too, there is the wonderful possibility that he may be gloriously, happily wrong."

"Ah."

"I'd like to see your work."

"You shall," I replied simply.

I was living at the time, in a five-flight walk-up on West Ninety-eighth Street. I gave Steena my address, and we made an appointment for the following evening.

As the hour approached for Steena's visit, I paced the room nervously. I had smoked three cigarettes (a vice in which I rarely indulge) in the space of an hour, and I had placed my one good canvas in various positions in the room. First by the bed, then by the window, and I finally decided to prop it up on the small easel I had standing in the centre of the room. It was an illustration done in egg tempera showing a group of spectators watching a Yale-Harvard boat race. It was so obviously a commercial attempt that I was afraid of Steena's incisive, penetrating criticism. The nervous tension was unbearable. I was just about to light another cigarette when the buzzer sounded.

When Steena entered, we exchanged the usual commonplaces, and she started to take off her coat. Just as she had it off one shoulder, however, she noticed my painting and suddenly froze to attention.

"Charles," she said, and her voice was a muted cello, "it's good! It's really good!"

"Do you think so?"

"Think! I know. I can *feel* it. It's non-static, filled with movement. What do you call it?"

"Just 'The Boat Race.'"

"Just! That's a wonderful title. It has such a gay, yet poignant irrelevance to the subject."

"My instructor didn't like it. He said that in the group of spectators you couldn't tell which of the people were men and which of the people were women. In fact, he said you couldn't tell which of the people were people."

"Of course you can't. That's the beauty of it. But the composition—the dynamic force. This shadowy representation of an old man in the lower right-hand corner. You can tell his shoulders are bent under the sorrows of centuries." She pointed to the Harvard crew.

"Yes," I said.

"And the colors! I love the way they ping back and forth." We stood and watched them ping for awhile.

"Charles," she said, "you have it—you have the fire of genius. And I'm glad, very glad. But I'm sad too." She dropped her coat on the bed. "Ah, we artistic temperaments. We must be mad—quite mad. For it's a form of insanity—this thing that writhes in us for expression, that sears the soul and tears at the very flesh itself." As she walked over to the window I noticed that she had gained a little weight.

"Come here, Charles." I walked over to the window, and she put her head very close to mine. "Look down there. Look at those people wandering purposelessly, idiotically. Some going north, some going south—what does it all mean?" Her eyes flashed behind the lenses, and she gripped my hand in hers. "What does it all really mean?" I was silent. "Never forget that, Charles." I never have.

"And don't let this pure thing you have, this spark of genius, become soiled and defiled by being bought and traded in the sordid marts of commerce." I never have.

We sat on the bed and Steena leaned back and gazed at the ceiling. "To think," she said, "that little Charles Cunningham grew up

to be an artist. I can remember you when you were a little boy. And now you're mature." She stared at me. "Quite mature." She put her arm around me and gave my shoulder a friendly rub. Then she hopped up and began to pace up and down the room.

"Charles," she said, "I have good news for you. You are not alone in your search for artistic truth. I have established a little oasis of culture in this desert of imbecility. I am going to nominate you for membership in the Promethean Club."

"The Promethean Club?"

"A group of writers, painters, and actors who are too advanced to be groped at by the mob. The membership is limited to five people; but recently," and her voice faltered, "one of us passed away."

"He—died?"

"No. He—he started to write like Ernest Hemingway." We observed a brief moment of silence.

"But you, Charles, will pick up the torch he dropped."

She looked at me and almost smiled. It was characteristic of Steena that her countenance never reflected empty mirth. She suffered that natural loneliness of the great, and her life had never been a happy one. Now, as she explained to me, while her whole spirit was crying for expression, she was forced to work as a secretary in an advertising agency. It was hateful for one of her talent to be constantly immersed in the sordid stream of commerce. And besides, she couldn't type very well.

Before Steena left, she gave me

her address and told me to be at the club meeting the following Friday at eight o'clock in the evening. And she gave me an invaluable bit of advice.

"Charles," she said, "I'm telling you this for your own good. Quit art school. It will be the wisest move you ever made."

The next afternoon my instructor agreed with Steena.

The following Friday was one of the most important days of my life. When I arrived at Steena's place at eight o'clock, there were several people already gathered. Steena took me by the hand when I came in and introduced me to the club members.

There was Chauncey Thorton, a tall wistful-looking poet, Fletcher Hastings, a tall wistful-looking dramatist, and an actor named Claude Rooney, who was above medium height and wore a rather wistful expression. Steena poured us all a cold, refreshing glass of water (she disapproved, quite rightly I think, of alcohol), and after someone proposed a humorous little toast we got down to business. As guest of honor I sat next to Steena on the chintz-covered lounge, and the others sprawled nonchalantly on the floor. When everyone became comfortable, Steena spoke.

"Chauncey," she said, "I believe you have something for us."

Chauncey Thorton stood up and pulled a piece of paper from his inside coat pocket.

"I call this poem," he said "'Spirit Ashes.'"

"Wonderful!" said Steena, and

gripped my hand with excitement. Chauncey read.

"The restless enigmatic soul
Doom-anxious seeking the unseekable,
Painfully expires in the gray shroud of
Time,
In an ever ending, never ending Eternity."

We sat stunned by its quiet beauty. Steena was so moved that she seemed to forget that she had my hand in hers. When we had sufficiently recovered, Fletcher Hastings stood up.

"I regret," he said, "that my little opus is, as yet, incomplete. I'm having a little trouble starting the second act, but with your permission I'll read Act One." He cleared his throat. "From Out the Wind—A Bitter Musical Comedy."

He began to read and it was marvelous. I don't feel at liberty to divulge the plot, but in the last scene the hero and heroine are sitting on a park bench. Just as he turns to kiss her, an old Chinaman comes in smoking an opium pipe. They are surprised but ignore him when he goes to sleep on a nearby bench. They again attempt to kiss, but another old Chinaman enters also smoking an opium pipe. Soon the stage is filled with opium-smoking old Chinamen and in a frenzy of frustration the hero and heroine commit suicide. It was very symbolic. I could see, though, that writing the second act beginning might prove a little difficult.

After this, Claude Hastings read a few selections from *Hamlet*. This called for another round of water, and then Chauncey Thorton spoke up.

"Steena," he said, "we haven't heard from you for quite some time.

Come on, suppose you tell us what you've been doing."

"Well," she said, "I'm going to surprise you all next week. I've just finished a novelette and I think it may have something." She leaned back and closed her eyes. "There is nothing lonelier than the sound of a train whistle," she said, "unless it's the soul of an artist. In the story, I relate the agonies of the Spirit to the wail of the whistle. It shuttles back and forth between sound and feeling, a variation on an eternal theme that ends on a note of triumphant despair."

"That's a wonderful idea," said Claude Rooney.

Fletcher Hastings gave an excited little gasp.

"But," said Steena, "I don't know whether I really accomplished what I set out to do. I may have attempted more than I'm capable of fulfilling."

"Nonsense," said Claude, "you have a great talent."

"I know," said Steena, "but am I a genius?"

The answer to this was so obvious that we merely smiled.

As I was about to leave, Steena came over to me and rubbed the back of my neck in a gesture of friendly camaraderie.

"If you want to stay for awhile, Charles, you may," she said.

"No thank you, Steena. I feel a little exhausted."

She gave my ear a neighborly tweak.

"I thought we might talk over your work."

"Suppose we have lunch together tomorrow instead."

"Oh, all right," she said, and I

could tell by the weary expression on her face that the evening had tired her a bit too.

When I went home that night, my heart was bouncing like a toy balloon. The moon had transformed Manhattan into a silver-gray forest of shimmering stone, and my spirit sang with blithe exuberance. At last I knew people who were "doing something." If I had only known then the tragedy I was about to bring upon this happy little group.

The next day as I was preparing to meet Steena for lunch, the telegram arrived. It said:

ARRIVING GOTHAM NOON
SIX DAY CONVENTION
BRING ON THE GIRLS. JIM.

Now if there was anyone I had no desire to see at this time, it was my uncle James Cunningham. I have always reacted with violent sensitivity to the personalities of my acquaintances, and I find it impossible to work creatively among people whose characters emanate an aura even slightly antagonistic. And, if under an emotional stress I may be permitted a crudity, Uncle James' aura stank. He is my father's younger brother; the perennially adolescent, fortyish, bachelor type. A commercial traveler by profession, he has no aim in life other than increasing the sales of "silvertube" toothpaste. He lives in Camden. And he drinks.

I put down the telegram with distaste, called up Steena, and explained my predicament. We agreed to meet him at the station, and shuttle him off to his hotel, after which we would have our lunch.

When Uncle James met us at the train platform, he immediately started to shout what he fondly supposed were witticisms.

"Hiya, Chaz," he yelled, "how's the artist in the family?" This was followed by a loud guffaw.

"Very well, thank you," I replied witheringly.

"Chaz, you've been holding out on me. Who's the lovely young lady?" Steena flushed with embarrassment.

"This," I said coldly, "is Miss Steena Gallagher."

"Hello, Honbun," he said. "Where have you been all my life?" And he winked.

He promptly vetoed the idea of our taking him to his hotel and insisted that we lunch with him. I still shudder when I think of that luncheon. He drank three Martinis and became quite insulting when Steena and I ordered water. He told a crude joke about a father and daughter who were victims of a train holdup, reviewed his salary for the last three years, and directed many thinly veiled verbal improprieties at Steena. She, poor girl, writhed in her chair during the entire meal, and I was not surprised when she left hastily saying that she had to get back to the office.

Uncle James and I drank our coffee, after he had instructed the waitress to omit the sugar and merely stir it with her finger. He then leaned back and lit a vile-smelling cigar.

"I like that little babe you introduced me to, Chaz. She's got a lotta class."

I told him that I didn't think she was quite his type.

"No need to apologize, kid." Apologize indeed! "I like 'em a little fat." And he gave me a vulgar nudge in the ribs.

After I had dropped Uncle James at his hotel, I rushed over to Steena's office. Luckily she wasn't busy at the moment.

"Steena," I said, "I can't tell you how sorry I am. He's an impossible person."

"It's not your fault, Charles. Suppose we just chalk it up to experience."

"I dread next week. I know that when he is in town I won't be able to accomplish anything."

"Charles, you must!"

"But, Steena, you know how sensitive I am to auras."

There was a long pause and then she said, "Charles, he's bad for you. You must avoid him."

"But that's impossible. I can't be impolite. I've got to see him a little bit."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Look, Steena, I'm afraid I won't be able to finish that painting by Friday night."

"Charles Cunningham, you've got to! You owe it to your art."

"But Uncle James—?" Steena grabbed my arm and when she spoke, her voice was harsh.

"Don't worry about that boor. I'll see that he doesn't interfere."

"But how can you?"

"I've got a plan. Don't worry about it. He won't bother you, I promise. And we'll unveil your painting next Friday night."

She was right. I worked all week

without interruption. I had even neglected to call Steena, so excited was I about the painting. It was an abstraction done in oil and pastels which I had decided to call "Abstraction in oil and pastels." I awakened early Friday morning and worked until noon putting on the finishing touches. I went out to purchase lunch, and when I returned I found a very distracted Steena waiting on the front steps.

"Charles," she said, "I must get back to the office. I just dropped by to give you the key."

"What key?"

"The key to my apartment. I may be late for the meeting this evening, so I want you to let the Prometheans in." She turned away from me. "I'm seeing your Uncle off on the seven-thirty train."

"Steena," I said, "I don't know what you did to keep him from bothering me, but I want to tell you how grateful I am."

"Don't mention it, Charles."

"But it meant a great deal to me. If I could only give you some little gift to prove to you how—" She interrupted me by raising her hand.

"It was nothing, Charles, nothing, believe me. Your paintings are the only reward I deserve." I've never received a more gracious compliment.

We all arrived promptly at the meeting that evening. While waiting for Steena, we excitedly discussed the story she was going to read. By eight-fifteen, however, we all felt slightly nervous. Chauncey Thorton was standing at the mirror carefully rumpling his hair. Fletcher Hastings and Claude Rooney

slumped dejectedly on the couch, and I started the water running in the kitchen so that it would be cool and refreshing by the time Steena arrived. I was certain that Uncle James had caught his train, and I could ill conceal the agitation I felt at Steena's absence. When the telephone rang, I answered it. When I picked it up, I could hear nothing but the sound of cheap music and an occasional harsh laugh.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, is this Little Charley?" It was Steena's voice, but it seemed strangely choked or thickened with emotion.

"Yes."

"Best little guy in the whole world," said Steena. "Listen, Chaz, I'll be right over."

"Well, hurry, Steena, we're all waiting for you."

"Look, I haven't much time to talk. I'm coming up to pack, and then we're catching a late train to Camden."

"We?"

"Honbun and me." Again the strange thick quality.

"Honbun?"

"Jim."

"But, Steena, you can't do this. You must be insane."

"Show a little respect, kid. You're talking to your future Aunt."

"But what about The Whistle?"

"What whistle?"

"The Whistle—"The Whistle in the Heart."

"Oh, *that!*" she said. "The hell with it." And I thought I heard her giggle.

Philadelphia: A Point of Departure

● Claude F. Koch

I.

THERE are cities in the world more depressing than Philadelphia, but no Philadelphian will admit it. Sometimes, it is true, the stiff civic pride cracks, and a shamefaced son will mumble (but this is always on the tram at Auckland, or mounting the steps at Ara Coeli, or in the assault wave going into Anzio) that there *are* those two weeks in spring, or that month in autumn. . . . But as soon as the war is over, or the traveler gets off in the isolation of the Thirtieth Street Station, the old grim pride in travail settles again and he joins the ragged ranks of hay fever, sinus, or malaria veterans who grope out of the winter fogs of South Philadelphia at 7 A.M. or wilt down the Germantown Road in the dead blanket and middle of the summer. No ascetic was ever so enamoured of his imposed affliction, or so determined to multiply his pain.

Periodically the Brotherhood concerned with such things (and their name is mystery) steps in and ravages at random. Today the old house that fed the wavering spirit with some sense of lives past (and the form of minds long preparing for us) goes under, and the supermarket rises in that place to feed all that remains. The nineteenth century built banks like Grecian temples; the supermarkets are shrines of unknown architectural ancestry. Each age to its idols. Tomorrow the gas lamp that threw just the appropriate amount of shadow goes down, and a blackened wooden pole juts from the spot and suspends its arc light over the unnecessary darkness. Now it is the unnecessary ceremony, the unnecessary event, the unnecessary object or place or person that is the margin of life. Guard us from the man who feels himself necessary; he peoples brigs and bastiles, is architect of intolerance and mischief. So, from the way of life that cannot spill over into the margins of things.

I make haste to say that education is truly concerned with the unnecessary *things*, and probably this is why education is perhaps not possible in Philadelphia. Education as distinguished from boot training, you know; and certainly as distinguished from a conditioning in animal cunning. All through the last century, long after he had his indoctrination in method, the sad and premonitory figure of Henry Adams wavered—searching for his education.

Perhaps no one save a teacher or a parent cares for education at this time. The teacher because he must have some excuse for those long

summer vacations (which he spends on trams at Auckland and on the steps of Ara Coeli—when he isn't in the assault wave at Anzio or setting up a baseball concession at Atlantic City); the parents because they are the world's dreamers and seek the vast margin of breath and light and breadth of the unnecessary things for the strange hopeful unknown extensions of themselves who have been growing into the sure grooves of necessity. Certainly no student in Philadelphia seeks more in the college walls than shelter from the draft? A rhetorical question, but soon to precede the loyalty oaths.

By definition the *student* is intense, searching, eager, forward, grasping—but education comes when the hand is relaxed, and the eyes are opened to the candid paradox of things, and one has stepped back and down to sit by the fountain's ledge where the children skate charmingly and full tilt backwards into the blind beggar.

Can it be the Philadelphia air, or has the student changed so utterly since the Golden Days before World War II, when today's new teachers were young, and God was in his heaven, and the two weeks of spring and the four weeks of autumn were years long? The complaint is raised: students don't sleep in class anymore. The capacity for innocent sleep, sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care, sleep that could be summoned anywhere and under any conditions, death's other night that served on the atolls and in the hedgerows later—that relaxed grip so necessary to education. Students don't sleep in class anymore. Let that be the knell of our times. The shifting, nervous, uneasy tempo that's in trip hammer, television commercial, Stravinsky, Chagal, and *From Here to Eternity* has invaded the suburbs, seized the tribunes, and encamped platoon by jittery platoon in *Economics I*, *Biology 2 and 3*, and *Shakespeare A and B*.

And Philadelphia, of all the sprawling cities of the West, feeds the fragmentation of the spirit and the St. Vitus dance of the mind. Education implores margin, begs *vista*. Literally. Only the metaphysician may deny that the mind becomes what it contemplates, never the poet. Is "chaos the state of nature, order the dream of man"? To the extent this is true, the Greek seized his dream in the form of the parthenon; and Chartres builded—stone upon communal stone—the symbol and form of a century. William buried Harold, warder of the sea and land, in his purple on the high cliff at Hastings—the vista a symbol of his gigantic spirit.

The picture windows look out on the ash cans in Philadelphia—and it is sad that few care. The student becomes what he looks upon. Dare we escape hanging?

But a few nights ago in Philadelphia, when the moon was as pale as a face and its light textured the sky as a quilt, surely the cumulative longings of all who had walked these streets before us were suspended in the slight air. A young man whom one had known at La Salle College and the University of Pennsylvania waved a uniformed arm at a cab down

the block and said: "Well, I don't know what the hell I was doing in Korea or anywhere else, for that matter."

The cumulative longings of all who had walked these streets before is a figure easy to dismiss, but the day comes when the ordinary teacher is confronted by the ordinary student (or ex-student) with such an ordinary statement and the education of teacher and student hangs in the balance, but a balance like that maintained by the famous sword whose thread alone holds uneasily back chaos and old night.

II.

Which brings us to the point of departure. Philadelphia is not a place, but a state of mind. I do not deny the geographical locality, but see that it spills over into Camden, and eats up the green fields and barns of Bucks, and is greedy to divert the streams underground where they may join the multitudinous sewers, and create parking lots where the uneconomical and offensive old trees stood, and straighten the willowing roads to the rigors and tyrannies of mathematick. A clear demonstration of a state of *mind*, not *things*. For mind destroys things, is egotistical, encompassing, brooks no contradiction, is hungry, paranoic, and murders what it cannot use. It cares not for education, but for conquest. It is incurably romantic and believes in progress, moves onward and upward forever, and will make a geometrical tree if it has to deforest the earth to silence contradiction. But education subdues the mind to the subtle discipline in tears and laughter, and lives in the thin clean light of forms. Education is the slow, bitter humbling of the *rational* animal, the loosening of the domineering and egotistical fist.

My friend who did not know what he was doing in Korea is a full sharer in what may be called the Philadelphia State of Mind, which is possibly the mind of twentieth century America, and is the mind of the nineteenth century slogan. My friend, whom I love and admire, straightens roads, cuts down trees, uproots old gas lamps, dispenses with the unnecessary darkness, narrows margins, restricts vistas, builds supermarkets, and with good degrees, both secular and Catholic, rids himself of the intolerable burden of the past in its tangible forms—and moves onward and upward forever. Under the rubble of the Georgian facade is buried original sin, and the supermarket entombs the terror of the family curse.

When to the eyes of Emerson and Whitman America opened westward its vast promise, and the past was articulated as an "intolerable burden" to be sloughed, the slogans were coined. It was a day of incurable optimism, and optimism leads incurably to generalizations, and generations could nourish upon them. If the margin was not in the individual life, it could be sought westward—it was always a hope promising fulfillment. So Americans lived on slogans "as a chameleon lives on air." The slogans remain, and are newly coined in a shadowy, television world. The places

and structures and patterns of thought that were the vistas of the spirit, and that in tangible reality gave form to events and memory, and preserved the struggles to be re-experienced and appreciated by future generations—surrendered to supermarkets and the jiggling change of the native mind. Avid for generalizations, abstractions, slogans—long after more than the frontier closed, and certainly the cities closed around them—a generation went away to World War I to “make the world safe for democracy,” and returned to search for democracy, and found a slogan. Their sons shipped and flew and marched into World War II, and returned to write *From Here to Eternity* and flip television dials in dim rooms, and watch their younger brothers move into the bewilderment of Korea. For here was the materialization of the most encompassing generalization of all, and always in the past we had dieted on ideas and destroyed at will the tangible forms the ideas took.

But to contemplate the unnecessary forms that order assumes, mortal or celestial, is the compulsion of the educated man.

The Philadelphians of the world deny.

Timing

● **Christine Turner Curtis**

The unobtrusive dripping
of pineneedles
to the frosted grass
is as grains of sand
slipping
through an hour glass.

No one hears the unhasping,
yet the needles fall,
silver and tan,
a taut brown nailhead
clasping
each five-fingered fan.

Quietly spread and plaited
the needles weave
in somnolent motif
a coat of mail
matted
against winter and grief.

The Theater in Philadelphia

The Worm That Eats Its Tail

• Dan Rodden

(Since my concern in the theater in Philadelphia, these past few months, has largely been centered in one theater—a draughty, sprawling college auditorium where a group of us frenzied amateurs have been preparing an original musical comedy, partly of my own making, for the not-too-critical eyes of our sisters and our cousins and our aunts—I have foregone my accustomed unrequested attention to the more professional antics downtown. I am informed that nothing of historic importance took place during my truancy. The one-act play which follows is an adaptation of Joe Coogan's Collier's story of the same name, was the point of departure for the above-mentioned musical comedy, and may thus have a certain interest for students of the lower art forms.)

THE VOICE OF A WOMAN

I was about twelve years old when it happened. If I had been ten years old, I would not have understood Mr. Weejo. And if I had been fourteen, I would not have believed him.

(At CURTAIN, the room of JOE WEEJO in a cheap boarding-house in downtown Philadelphia. While much like other rooms in other boarding-houses in any large city, it must have somehow a special, exotic atmosphere—probably the result of the cooking of certain strange Eastern dishes, and much burning of incense. There is a door up center, and to its left a bed. To the left of the bed is a small table, with a reading lamp lit, and on the table, the picture of a Hollywood beauty. There is a window in the left wall, and on the windowsill is a beer stein. Down right from the door is another small table or box, on which is a hot-plate bearing a lop-sided tin kettle. Under the hot-plate is the shin-bone of a camel, of course. In front of the bed is a trunk-locker, in which are contained the Worm of Oroborus, a saateen smock, and a pointed wizard's cap. Draped variously about the room are such interesting objets d'art as an alligator skin, the head of a goat, and an ossified cat. JOE WEEJO reclines on his bed, idly staring through a small stereopticon, and puffing away on a long-tubed Turkish pipe. He is about fifty, grandiose, with a trace of an indeterminate accent. There is a knock at the door.)

CONNIE

Let us in, Mr. Weejo! It's me—Connie!

WEEJO

Coming, my dear. Coming! (He rises, puts the stereopticon in the trunk, takes from it a seedy bathrobe, which he dons.)

(WEEJO opens the door. Enter CONNIE DEIGHAN, an intensely idealistic tomboy in boy's shirt and dungarees. With her is BUDDY, her fourteen-year-old brother. Sophisticated, he is attired in an improvised baseball uniform; both carry baseball gloves, and BUDDY a bat.)

CONNIE

Hi, Mr. Weejo! This is my brother, Buddy. Buddy, this is Mr. Joe Weejo—like I been tellin' you.

BUDDY

(Takes a long, doubtful look around the room.) Hi.

WEEJO

Any brother of Connie's is of course—my friend. Welcome to my humble dwelling, Deighan. (Buddy smiles appreciatively at the adult salutation.) You see me now reduced from my usual estate to a condition for which I can only—apologize.

CONNIE

Mr. Weejo, I been tellin' Buddy about—you know, what you been tellin' me. Gee, Buddy—Mr. Weejo's been everywhere! He's seen just about everything, I guess.

WEEJO

Sit down, please. Ah, it's a cause of great sorrow to me that I can offer you nothing but the hospitality of this humble room, but circumstances have forced upon me a way of life I wouldn't have chosen. Well! I see you're attired for the national pastime. Do you play, too, Connie?

CONNIE

Sure I play! I'm good!

BUDDY

Aah—plenty field, no hit.

CONNIE

I can, too! .278 this season! If you count walks as hits.

WEEJO

I was quite a ball-player myself, in the days before I became interested in the culinary arts.

CONNIE

Cooking, Buddy.

WEEJO

Please, Connie! I am not a cook! I am a master chef—an artist! Why—I've mixed the Weejo salad-oil formula in the finest kitchens of the world! I came here directly from a triumphant engagement—at a thousand a week—at the Playmore Hotel in Atlantic City!

BUDDY

If you can make that kind of dough—what are you doin' in *this* dump?

WEEJO

It's—quite a long story, Buddy. Would you like to hear it?

CONNIE

Go ahead, Mr. Weejo! What's it about?

WEEJO

Women. (*Buddy sits forward, in-*

terested.) First of all, whatever you do—you must tell no one I am living here. The world must not know that Weejo is in Philadelphia.

CONNIE

We won't tell a soul, Mr. Weejo.

WEEJO

The consequences might be— (*he makes a casual but very significant gesture.*) Well, as I was seated on the beach one day, basking in the Atlantic City sunshine, a glamorous woman passed by. Clinging to her hand was a small child—a boy of, I would say, possibly three. I was wearing dark glasses, so the crowd wouldn't recognize me—I'd had enough of *that* sort of thing in Biarritz. Then I noticed that the little boy had wandered away from the woman. She didn't notice—she couldn't keep her eyes away from—me. The little boy walked into the water, and — suddenly! (*Weejo reaches this climax so stridently that both kids jump.*) he was swept into the waves by the strong undertow! The woman screamed. Everyone lost their heads—the beach was a seething turmoil of confusion—except for Weejo. Instantly, I threw away my sun-glasses and plunged in after him. In a moment I'd reached him. In another moment, my swift, powerful strokes—the same that had won me first prize in the 1924 Olympics—had him safely ashore. I brought him to the woman. She was speechless with terror and gratitude—but her eyes held a thousand promised rewards. "Madam," I said simply, "here is your son." "He's not my son!" she cried. "He's my little nephew, and you—you are Joe Weejo, the famous chef!"

CONNIE

She knew you, huh, Joe.

WEEJO

Yes, my secret was out. I cursed the fatal impetuous gesture that had made me throw away my sunglasses. I knew I'd never get to the hotel without being hounded by my fans—

BUDDY

So what'd you do?

WEEJO

My discomfiture must have shone through my eyes. Because the woman said to me, "I have an apartment very near here."

BUDDY

Uh-huh. Wow!

CONNIE

Shut up, Buddy! Go ahead, Mr. Weejo.

WEEJO

Later her attentions became so demanding that I was forced to leave Atlantic City, and seek refuge here in the comparative safety of Philadelphia. You wouldn't believe me if I told you that woman's name—but that woman's name was—*(Weejo crosses to the window, picks up the stein and, finding it empty, makes ready to rectify the situation. As he crosses to the door, he pauses briefly by the two kids, who have been holding their breaths awaiting the name of the mystery woman, and whispers to them softly. Then he exits, as Connie sighs audibly.)*

CONNIE

Gee!

BUDDY

He's right about one thing—I wouldn't believe him! What's he tryin'

to do—kid us or somethin'?

CONNIE

Gee. I saw her last movie. She was—she was just wonderful!

BUDDY

Yo, Connie! How'd you happen to meet this crackpot, anyway? His landlady was tellin' Mom—she says he's crazy, or somethin'. He just took this room from Mrs. Winters this week. How come you met him so fast?

CONNIE

I don't know. It was Tuesday night, and I was walkin' down the street skippin' cracks. You know how you skip cracks. And I hit one, and Mr. Weejo said, "Hey, you hit one!"—and we got talkin'. And I been up here every night since. Gee, he knows—everything, Buddy.

BUDDY

Well, Mrs. Winters, she told Mom—she says he's crazy, or somethin'. She says he burns stuff in here. Smelly stuff.

CONNIE

Oh, sure! That's when he exercises his magic powers. He's a wizard, too.

BUDDY

Are you kiddin'? Boy—she's right about the smell. You know what this place smells like? Gym period.

CONNIE

It smells all right to me. It's just Oriental.

BUDDY

Where'd he go, anyway?

CONNIE

Didn't you see him take that beer mug? He went down to McGuigan's on the corner. He's almost always

got that mug filled up with beer, or else he's down at McGuigan's drinking beer. He likes beer.

BUDDY

Yeah, well—they don't want him down at McGuigan's. I heard McGuigan and Major McGowan talk-in'. They don't want him down there.

CONNIE

They better watch out. Mr. Weejo is a very important man.

BUDDY

Aah!

CONNIE

He is, too. Take yesterday. Yesterday Mr. Weejo got a letter from the War Department. They want the Weejo formula!

BUDDY

Formula? For what?

CONNIE

Poison gas. Norway wants it too, but of course, Mr. Weejo's an American citizen—so *we'll* get it.

BUDDY

Yeah? I think he's crazy or something, like Mrs. Winters says. It's interesting when he tells about women, though.

(WEEJO re-enters, fuming. He carries a full stein of beer, is very angry.)

WEEJO

McGowan! Major McGowan, he calls himself! What army? That's all I ask—what army! The Boy Scouts! that's what army! We'll see to McGowan. *His stool, indeed!*

CONNIE

What did Major McGowan do, Mr. Weejo?

WEEJO

Uh? Oh, you're still here—pardon

my seeming lack of manners, but—the man is impossible. *His stool!* A man may have a home, yes! A family, yes! He may have a limousine. But how can a man have a *stool*?

BUDDY

Oh. You sat in Major McGowan's stool, huh. Did they kick you out?

WEEJO

The fellow dared to lay his hand upon me. Me, Weejo!

CONNIE

I hate Major McGowan, anyway! He's just an old—fump. Did you hit him, Mr. Weejo?

WEEJO

No, Connie—I didn't dare. I left—graciously and quietly. The man will never know how close he was to his Maker.

BUDDY

So why'nt you hit him? Scared?

WEEJO

Scared? Yes, in a way. After the regrettable incident of Killer Grant—London, 1926—I fear to strike a blow in anger.

CONNIE

Gosh. Why?

WEEJO

One punch, Connie, was all I struck. One punch—and Killer Grant hovered between life and death for weeks. Even today, he walks with a cane.

BUDDY

Where'd you hit him—in the foot?

WEEJO

Hmm. Oh, yes—I was telling you of the affair with the glamorous—*(Weejo again does the whispering business. Buddy is unimpressed.)*

BUDDY

Yeah. And it sounded like a lot of baloney to me. How would a guy like you ever get to meet *her*, anyway?

CONNIE

Buddy, shut up! 'Course you met her, Mr. Weeje—if you said you did.

WEEJO

Your brother seems to doubt my word, Connie. Perhaps *this* will convince him. (*Weeje goes to bed table, where he takes the picture that rests thereon, brings it over to the kids.*) Here, you will—notice the dedication.

CONNIE

"In memory of a very perfect moment of bliss, your beloved—" Gee!

BUDDY

Hey. Tell us more about women.

WEEJO

Women, son? Ah, yes—women. That is a subject upon which Joe Weeje can well discourse. Shall I tell you the strange and beautiful story of Maluba, the lovely Javanese spy? She came to me one night in Singapore, during a frightful umoo. She was in the pay of a government I dare not mention—it is supposedly friendly—and her orders were: "Get the Weeje formula!"

BUDDY

The Weeje formula?

CONNIE

Poison gas! Remember?

WEEJO

Weeje-lite, I call it. I'd rather you didn't speak of it as *poison gas*, my dear. It is so much more subtle—and humane.

BUDDY

What's it *do*?

WEEJO

Temporarily paralyzes the trigger fingers of the enemy. Ingenious? But I must not seem to monopolize the conversation. How is your school work coming, Connie? What are you studying now?

CONNIE

Oh, you know—spelling, and all.

BUDDY

She's only in grammar school. I'm in high school. We're studying ancient history. We're studying about Aristotle.

WEEJO

Ah, yes. Aristotle. Another smart Greek—like myself.

(ANNIE WINTERS bursts in without the courtesy of a knock. She is wrathful. She is WEEJO's landlady.)

ANNIE

Weeje—this is your last warning! I told you before and I tell you again! Major McGowan's been complaining about you! One more complaint, and out you go!

WEEJO

Madam, you are most injudicious. The complaints of this McGowan are unfounded and completely without semblance of truth. Especially do I resent, in the presence of my guests—

ANNIE

Guests, is it? I'll guest them! Connie Deighan, you know your mother forbid you to have anything more to do with this crackpot! Buddy, you're older—you oughta have more sense. The both of you had better be getting home. And as for you,

Weeje—mind this last warning!
(*Exits.*)

WEEJO

Again this McGowan! Does this McGowan realize that I have but to don my wizard's cap—*(he does)* and my robe—*(he does)* and summon forth the Worm of Oroborus. *(He brings out of the trunk a curious, circular brown object.)*

BUDDY

Ain't it a little early for Hallowe'en?

CONNIE

The Worm of Or-o-bor-us?

WEEJO

The worm that eats its tail. See? One of the most ancient of mystic devices. With the aid of the Worm, I can reduce this Major McGowan to the level of a fallen spirit!

(MAJOR MCGOWAN appears in the doorway. He is fussy and pompous, about fifty, with an assumed military bearing.)

MAJOR

Oh, you can, eh? Weeje, our esteemed landlady, Mrs. Winters, has no doubt communicated to you my desires. While you continue in these quarters, you will cease and desist from all such activities as those which have recently fouled the air of the barracks. Ugh! Repulsive! Why, in the old regiment—

WEEJO

Oh, I will cease and desist, will I! You presume to address Weeje in this tone! Walk softly, McGowan—lest you tempt me to call upon my mystic arts and strike you helpless on the spot!

MAJOR

Eh? Insubordination! By all that's holy—insubordination! Why, in the old regiment I'd have you up before

the board! Misguided, friendless wretch that you are!

CONNIE

What do you mean, friendless, Major McGowan? Why, Mr. Weeje knows all kinds of big people! Just look—show him that picture, Buddy!

WEEJO

Just a minute, Buddy—don't show McGowan that picture!

BUDDY

Look at this picture, Major McGowan. He met her in Atlantic City.

WEEJO

Uh—yes. The picture, McGowan, should quell your petty talk.

MAJOR

I'm—not so sure! Let's have a better look at this photograph! *(He pulls the picture from its frame, takes a careful look at the front and then—the back! He smiles a nasty smile.)* Aha! Just as I thought!

WEEJO

Let that picture be, McGowan!

MAJOR

See this stamp on the back? "Publicity still, not to be removed from the lobby of the—

BUDDY

Arch St. Theatre!" Well, I'll be—Weeje, you big phony!

MAJOR

So, Weeje—you filched the picture, the handwritten inscription is your own, and *thus—thus* we put an end to this imaginary romance! Most unsoldierly behavior, Weeje. Most unmilitary. *(The Major's right hand rips the picture to shreds.)*

WEEJO

You will regret this move, McGowan! This time you have tempted the anger of Weejo too far! I place a curse upon you, McGowan! Upon your *right arm*—the arm that thrust me from the bar-stool at McGuigan's! The arm that ripped the photograph! I curse your arm by the Worm of Oroborus!

MAJOR

Curse away, charlatan! And, oh—before I leave, I am empowered by my great and good friend McGuigan, proprietor of the corner pub, to inform you that your presence is no longer desired in his establishment. As for you children, I suggest you return to the bosom of your good mother. (*Exits.*)

CONNIE

Gosh, Mr. Weejo! Why didn't you—why didn't you strike him dead on the spot?

BUDDY

Probably didn't want to get the room sloppy. Come on, Connie. Let's get outa here before he takes another slug of that beer and strikes us all dead!

WEEJO

One moment! You seem to doubt, even you, Connie—you seem to doubt my ability to invoke the Worm of Oroborus—to make the curse come true!

CONNIE

No, Mr. Weejo! That's not it, but—

BUDDY

But we think you're screwy! Come on, Connie—

WEEJO

Stop! You require proof, eh? Proof

I shall give you! (*He rummages under his grimy pillow, produces a wax or putty figurine, a pin stuck in its head.*) You recognize this fellow?

CONNIE

Well—no. That is, not exactly.

BUDDY

Maybe if he was wearin' a hat.

WEEJO

Oh, come now—surely, you *must* know him—his picture was in all the papers! You recall the case—the millionaire whose body was found, the skull fractured, beneath the span of the Henry Avenue Bridge, early Tuesday morning?

CONNIE

Oh, sure, Mr. Weejo! I remember now!

BUDDY

Yeah. Hanson, his name was. Hanson—or Ranson—or somethin' like that.

WEEJO

Hanson. Possibly you are not aware—*why* he came to his doom.

BUDDY

Papers seemed to think he wasn't gettin' along with his wife.

WEEJO

The press! The silly press! Perhaps you'd care to hear the *true* story of Hamilton Hanson's end.

BUDDY

Sure—go ahead! I got hours to burn!

CONNIE

Stop it, Buddy! Go ahead, Mr. Weejo!

WEEJO

Well—it was Monday morning.

You remember Monday morning—it was a gray morning—overcast, a hint of thunder in the air. The man Hamilton Hanson came to the restaurant where I am Master Chef, and ordered clam chowder. When he'd received it, he made the ridiculous claim that, instead of clams, I had substituted tripe. Me, Joe Weejo—the Master Chef! A small affront, you might think? Not to Weejo. I was maddened—aroused. I placed a curse on the head of the unfortunate fellow. That evening I fashioned this figurine. After I had prepared the magic potion, the formula for which is known only to seven of us, I inserted this pin in the head of the figure, and cast it into the potion, simultaneously invoking the aid of the Worm of Oroborus. You—know the rest.

CONNIE

Gosh!

WEEJO

Knowing what you now know, can you doubt that, with a few deft manipulations—so—a little added girth here—now, a little less chin—now! Recognize *this* chap?

CONNIE

Well—who is it?

BUDDY

Looks a little like John L. Lewis.

WEEJO

This figurine is now an exact replica of the man McGowan.

CONNIE

Oh.

WEEJO

Can you doubt that, with the aid of this figure—a few pins inserted into the accursed right arm of McGowan—and the Worm of Oroborus

—I could bring the same doom down upon McGowan that was visited on Hamilton Hanson? Eh?

BUDDY

Okay. Go ahead.

WEEJO

Huh?

BUDDY

Go ahead! I never did like McGowan, anyway.

WEEJO

Well, of course—there's the potion, of course. Yes, the potion. For the potion, of course, we'd require certain very special—ingredients. It would be a matter of days to assemble them. Possibly a week.

BUDDY

Ingredients? Such as?

WEEJO

Such as—ah—for example, for example ten live worms. In deference to the Worm of Oroborus, of course.

BUDDY

Say no more, Weejo—I got a bait can full of worms in my room next door. I can be back in no time. This—I gotta see. (*Exits.*)

CONNIE

That's wonderful, isn't it, Mr. Weejo. I mean, that Buddy has the worms. Now we can go right ahead with the magic potion. Isn't that good?

WEEJO

Oh, yes—yes. *Peachy*. Although—oh, great heavens, here I am forgetting! We won't be able to do it. I—just remembered. We would of course need a hair from the head of McGowan. Sorry, my dear—but the potion is either right or it isn't right. You see that.

CONNIE

Oh. Hey! I can get a hair from the head of Major McGowan!

WEEJO

You can?

CONNIE

Sure! I passed Major McGowan's room on the way comin' up—it's just downstairs. His door's open—he must have a hair-brush, or something, lyin' around! I'll be right back!

WEEJO

Hmm. (*Weeje first looks alarmed, then—with a shrug of his shoulders, and an expression on his face which indicates the inevitability of it all—"what must be, must be!" he sets about at work. CURTAIN.*)

(*A few minutes later. WEEJO is busily stirring the pot, as BUDDY enters.*)

BUDDY

I got back as fast as I could, Weeje. Only I think two of the worms died on the way over.

WEEJO

A small matter. They'll all be dead in a minute. Into the pot with them.

BUDDY

Where's Connie?

WEEJO

She's—running an errand for me.

BUDDY

What's that you're stirrin' with?

WEEJO

This? Very important. Very vital. It's the shin-bone of a camel. I have heard that the shin of a kangaroo will do as well—but I don't care to tinker.

(*CONNIE enters, carrying an envelope. She comes down to the kettle.*)

CONNIE

I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Weeje. I tried his hairbush—but I guess he cleans it.

WEEJO

Oh. Well, then—

CONNIE

But I got *this*! It'll work just as good—I *know* it will!

WEEJO

What is—*this*?

CONNIE

Major McGowan's coat was hangin' in his closet—and I got this off it!

BUDDY

What is it?

CONNIE

Dandruff! It'll work—won't it, Mr. Weeje?

WEEJO

I—suppose. Throw it in! Now—add a measured teaspoonful of beer. And stir. Stir constantly. Wouldn't do to let the potion set.

BUDDY

No. It might hatch.

CONNIE

Mr. Weeje, the curse now—what are you gonna do to Major McGowan's right arm?

WEEJO

That, my dear, I cannot say. One must not be—specific with the powers of darkness. The fellow's arm may wither—may possibly fall off! Or perhaps merely a severe case of acne. And now for the final ingredient. The beak of an Australian swallow.

BUDDY

Sorry, Weeje—you're gonna have to get a new boy for that job. I gotta be back for school Monday.

WEEJO

As it happens, I always carry a spare stock of Australian swallow beaks with me at all times—ever since that unfortunate summer in Budapest when my supply became depleted, and I was unable to curse anyone for several weeks. Here it is! Into the kettle with it! Now! The potion is ready! Let me see, the wax figure of McGowan—the pins—and the book. Where is the book? I had it right here. I must have the book—the Wizard's Handbook!

BUDDY

This isn't it, is it, Weejo?

WEEJO

Ah—that is it! Good.

BUDDY

"Wizardry—in the World Today, or How to be a witch." Twenty-five cents. Oh, brother!

CONNIE

What's in the book, Mr. Weejo?

WEEJO

Oh, all the regulation curses and incantations—Helpful Hints to Wizards—that sort of thing. Here, my dear—open to Chapter—Five, I think it is—"Suggested Curses." Now, take the pins and hand them to me as I need them. We are ready to begin. Buddy—the lights, please! First, the tribute to the Worm of Oroborus. (*Weejo bows before the Worm and murmurs some intelligent gibberish.*) I take the wax figure of my enemy, McGowan. I call upon thee, Oroborus, and thee, Osiris, and thee, Hecate—and all the powers of the unknown, to bring pain, terror and humiliation to mine enemy, McGowan! (*Annie comes*

into the doorway unnoticed, throws up her hands in shock, sniffs the air, and exits determinedly.) Bring to the right arm of McGowan deepest torment. Give him great pain—pin, Connie!—*here!* (*Connie starts handling Weejo pins. He sticks them into the waxen arm until it fairly bristles.*) May he suffer the tortures of blackest agony *here!* *Here* may he writhe—and *here* may he bleed; May he suffer *here* and *here* and *here* and *here* and *here!* May this happen—quickly! (*Weejo throws the wax figure into the magic potion.*) You may turn on the lights. The ceremony is—finished.

BUDDY

Is there a doctor in the house? Come on, Connie—I'm gettin' outa here! (*Exits.*)

CONNIE

Wait, Buddy—don't go—I—Mr. Weejo. Mr. Weejo—do you really think it'll work. I mean—really?

WEEJO

Do I think! Will it work!! Am I not Weejo? Connie—are you losing faith in me?

CONNIE

Aw, no, Mr. Weejo! Only—

WEEJO

Only—*what*, Connie?

CONNIE

Only—only, do you really think that—that something'll happen to Major McGowan's right arm? Just because you say it will?

WEEJO

Because *I* say it will? Because the Worm of Oroborus—and all the powers of mystery say it will—that's why it will happen! Connie!

CONNIE

Yeah, Mr. Weejo?

WEEJO

You *have* lost faith in me, Connie! You've been listening to these others around here—

CONNIE

Aw, no—I *haven't*, Mr. Weejo. I wouldn't believe anything they said! Only—

WEEJO

Only what, Connie?

CONNIE

Nothing.

WEEJO

You *have* listened to these others! The Winters woman—the so-called Major, McGowan—the petty neighborhood gossips—your own brother, even—they've made you lose faith in me! These Philadelphia peasants—how *could* they appreciate Weejo in their midst, who has walked with kings, and shared the confidences of the great men of our time. Take that letter I told you about yesterday—from the War Department!

CONNIE

What would—the War Department write to you about, Mr. Weejo?

WEEJO

I told you! The Weejo formula—another attempt to get their hands on Weejo-lite!

CONNIE

How do you—how do you make Weejo-lite, Mr. Weejo?

WEEJO

You don't believe that, either! Do you? Wait! I'll show you! I have the letter right here! (*And Weejo proceeds upon a hectic search of the room, for a letter which he knows doesn't exist, but which must exist,*

or his last castle goes toppling. He doesn't find it, of course.) I—had it right here.

(ANNIE and the MAJOR enter.)

ANNIE

There he is, Major McGowan—just like I told you! He's been cookin' in his room! I warned you, Weejo—and this here is the last straw!

MAJOR

Room's a disgrace. Never pass inspection. Quarters like this—disgraceful! Why, in the old regiment, we'd have—

ANNIE

You still here, Connie Deighan? Just wait'll I tell your mother! Well might you hang your head—associatin' with riff-raff like that! Master Chef, he calls himself! Short-order cook at Maggie's Lunch on Callow-hill Street, is what he is—or was, till yesterday when Maggie fired him for havin' the Board of Health down on her for his filthy kitchen!

MAJOR

The fellow would never have been let near a mess-hall in the old regiment.

ANNIE

This awful smell! Will the house ever be rid of it? (*She advances on the source of the smell, the pot boiling away on the hot plate. She picks it up, gingerly. Sniffing it, she drops it in horror, the contents spilling all over the floor.*) Ugh!

CONNIE

Oh! You spilled the magic potion all over the floor!

ANNIE

That settles it, Weejo! Pack and go this minute! Before Major McGowan throws you out!

(The MAJOR looks somewhat disturbed. He is one to push a man off a bar-stool when he isn't looking, but not a man to insist on physical violence if there is another way out.)

WEEJO

I assume the municipal rental regulations guaranteeing the tenant twenty-four hours notice before vacating still holds? I must insist upon my rights in order to prepare my accoutrements for shipment to another city.

ANNIE

Regulations, my foot! Out you go, this minute! Major McGowan, throw him out!

MAJOR

See here, Weejo. You've got your orders. Orders, you know, old man. Now in the old regiment—

WEEJO

Here I stay till I have the full twenty-four hour period guaranteed me by law!

ANNIE

Law, is it! Major McGowan, throw him out, and his trunk after him! McGowan—if you're a man—throw him out. *(The Major hasn't much pride, but what he has, has been appealed to. He assumes a position he takes to be menacing.)*

WEEJO

Come on, McGowan! Come and get me. You'll never take me alive! *(And Weejo takes a pose reminiscent of bar-room pictures of Jake Kilrain; the two men circle each other stiffly. Suddenly, the Major makes a lunge at Weejo, misses him, slips on the wet floor, and falls heavily.)*

MAJOR

Owwwww!

CONNIE

He slipped on the magic potion!

MAJOR

Owwwww!

ANNIE

Are you hurt, Major?

MAJOR

Owwwww—my arm! It's broken!

ANNIE

Your arm?

CONNIE

His arm! His right arm!

WEEJO

His right arm. Hmm. AHHHHH!

CONNIE

It worked! Oh, Mr. Weejo—it worked! The curse worked!

WEEJO

(Who has to swallow before he can speak.) Naturally.

CONNIE

The worm that eats its tail!

ANNIE

Hmm. Yes—it certainly is broken!

MAJOR

Don't give me a diagnosis, Annie Winters—Owwwww!—call a doctor! Get an ambulance! Call the Surgeon General!

ANNIE

All right, Major—I'll call an ambulance right this minute—there you go! I'll call the hospital, and also—the police! *(Annie and the Major exit. As soon as they have gone, Weejo sets about packing his belongings—the dead cat, the goat's head, etc.)*

CONNIE

His right arm! Just like you said, Mr. Weejo.

WEEJO

But, of course.

CONNIE

Mr. Weejo—can you ever forgive me for havin' doubted you?

WEEJO

Of course, my dear. These doubts come in the darkness of night and are banished in the cold light of morning.

CONNIE

Gee, Mr. Weejo—I guess you must be about the greatest man in the world! I mean—doin' stuff like this—gee!

WEEJO

Nothing at all, Connie—the merest suggestion of the miracles possible through application of the mystic arts. I am not alone in the field. I know of a wizard in Jersey City who, by application of the mystic arts, changed the whole course of a municipal election. There's another in Butte, Montana—there are several of us.

CONNIE

When the police come, Mr. Weejo—what'll you do? Put a curse on em? Strike 'em dead?

WEEJO

Well, no, I don't expect to be here—that is, it wouldn't be—*fair* to put a curse on minions of the law. They're merely doing their duty. No, I thought—by and large—it might be just as well if I left before they got here. Let's see, now—dead cat, goat's head, snake skin, beer stein—all packed.

CONNIE

Oh! I thought you were just puttin' your things away—then, you're *leavin'*?

WEEJO

I feel it is just as well, yes. I sense an unfriendly atmosphere.

CONNIE

Gee. Where'll you go?

WEEJO

Go? Oh, I don't know, exactly—I'm *wanted* in several cities. As the poet says, winter will soon be *acumin'* in—possibly St. Petersburg. Or the Italian Riviera.

CONNIE

Gee.

WEEJO

Well, I regret the necessity of haste, but—not to dawdle about it—farewell, my dear. Thank you—for having believed in me.

CONNIE

Gee. Goodbye, Mr. Weejo—(*She spies something on the bed. She picks it up and waves it.*) Mr. Weejo! Look! The Worm of Oroborus!

WEEJO

The Worm? Oh, yes—that. No, I'm not forgetting it—I wanted you to have it. Because—because you *alone* had faith. Keep it with you always. Farewell, my dear. (*And Weejo exits.*)

CONNIE

Gee.

(*Slow Curtain*)

THE VOICE OF A WOMAN

I was about twelve years old when it happened. If I had been ten years old, I would not have understood Mr. Weejo. And if I had been fourteen, I would not have believed him. I'm glad I was twelve.

(THE END)

The Place of the Ugly in Creative Writing

● Austin J. App

This selection is taken from Dr. App's forthcoming book
The Way to Creative Writing.

THE DEEPLY CHRISTIAN ARTISTS of the beautiful Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages, striving for beauty everywhere else, curiously gave vent to their concept of the ugly when they fashioned the waterspouts. Perhaps their mystic instincts wished these ugly gargoyles to symbolize evil for us, which like a shadow is ever lurking about. At any rate, creative writing cannot if truthful always avoid the ugly. Although it sounds paradoxical, the presentation of ugly things in ugly words can be brought into harmony with beauty if these words fittingly suggest bad or evil things. In fact, when such things are to be suggested, ugly words must be used, if truth is to be served. Whenever the Bible refers to a woman who sells her virtue for money, it uses a five-letter word too ugly to quote here. Where the purpose of the writing requires treatment of such matters, the use of such ugly words is right and proper. Conversely, calling such a woman, as some motion pictures have done, a *street angel* is a gross offense against art for the reason that it is an offense against the truth of things.

True art includes both emotional and intellectual beauty, which latter is truth. Creative writing to give a properly rounded view of life must come to grips with some ugly things. T. S. Eliot is quoted as saying somewhere

"The contemplation of the horrid or sordid by the artist is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward beauty."

Such aspects require ugly words. Nice words do very well for many, perhaps the predominating phases of life and literature—innocent young love, religious devotion, vocations, the seasons and holy days, children, the Holy Family, many of the saints. Perhaps when Plato said:

" . . . we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State."

he was really trying to reserve creative writing to only such themes as did not require ugly words. This standard would not disqualify the Bible, for though incidentally often literary, it is intentionally not creative but informative writing.

But it would disqualify Shakespeare, for he often used ugly words. So did of course also Chaucer and Dante, and probably every other great

writer. Chaucer is in fact in many passages too ugly for the more refined tastes of our times. Shakespeare in one of his most beautiful selections, has Jacques in *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene 7) speak of

“ . . . the infant
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms,”

of “the justice, In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,” and of the old man with hose “a world too wide For his shrunk shank.”

How can the ugly words here be justified as art? The justification is that Shakespeare needed both light and shade for a true picture of the stages of life. He levels a justified criticism at the judge for being too complacent and sybaritic. In the old man he wants to show how helpless and unprepossessing the once complacent man of affairs becomes. And what about the ugly words applied to the baby, or to use Shakespeare's more beautiful word, infant? His words are not emotionally beautiful, but they are intellectually fitting. They truthfully describe the helpless, unprepossessing qualities of a new-born child, a little bundle of life which the whole world loves but only a mother can find beautiful, and which in its day of adult power should have its early helplessness recalled, in order to remember that it too must go the way of the last two stages!

In short, sins and temptations, ailments and miseries may not be romanticized in creative writing with attractive, beautiful words. When theme or purpose requires these to be treated, you will have to follow Shakespeare's example, whose Hamlet alluding to his mother's incestuous passion for Claudius, does not wrap it in lyric but lashes at it as lust that “will prey on garbage.”

This dictional artistry, which calls for beauty consonant with truth, is forever in a state of tension with elegance, with the requirements of good taste. Good taste is not immutable as are the moral laws. Like fashions in clothes, the standards of good taste fluctuate. The principle that good taste must always be observed is immutable, but the how and when can vary with place, and time, and generations. No reputable Christian poet, no matter which human vices he wished to uglify could in English-speaking countries today use the ugly words Chaucer used in some of his Tales. That Chaucer felt the tension between propriety (elegance) and verisimilitude appears from his lame apology that to be honest he had to recount the stories in the words of his characters no matter how vulgar.

Virtually every fictional and dramatic writer suffers from this tension. A once fairly popular Catholic novelist, now deceased, used to complain that a novel must deal with sin, that sin is ugly, but that if he portrays its ugliness in fittingly ugly words, his good readers are shocked and angry. After having become a Catholic, John Dryden declared in the Preface to his Fables that whatever shocks religion or good manners is unacceptable. In selecting from Chaucer, he confined his choice “to such tales of Chaucer as savor nothing of immodesty.” To Chaucer's and Boccaccio's contention

that they only tried to reproduce the speech of their low characters truthfully, Dryden puts the question:

" . . . what need they had of introducing such characters, where obscene words were proper in their mouths, but very indecent to be heard . . . "

For a young writer it is certainly wise to avoid characters and plots which would accentuate the tension between good taste and factualness. Dryden's policy of avoidance is, however, a negative solution which would remove vast sectors of human life from the writer's corrective pen. The world is peopled by many bad characters, such as St. Paul enumerates:

"Do not err: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor the effeminate, nor liars with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor railers, nor extortioners, shall possess the kingdom of God" (To the Corinthians, Ch. 6, v. 9, 10).

Creative writers cannot on principle exempt such sinners from characterization. And when they do depict them, the words must convey something of the ugliness of their sins. Yet their description may not become a new temptation nor may their words within their proper setting seem too sordid for adult good taste. No infallible guide can be given for this most harassing of a writer's problems. Your innate good taste may be of most help to you. In your early career by all means err rather on the side of Dryden than of Chaucer.

Among the problems of adjusting ugly words and facts to the requirements of art is the use of slang. Slang, as distinguished from illiteracies and profanity, ought to be defined as the application of an ugly word to a good or to an indifferent object. To call food *grub* is slang. It is an ugly metonymy (cause for effect) for an indifferent, presumably reasonably wholesome object. Were it applied to really defective food, it might be acceptable. To call organized thieves *gangsters*, while colloquial, is not slang and is not objectionable. Evil things are designated by ugly figures. Slang is an ugly figure of speech applied to an object that does not deserve an ugly figure. It is therefore really an offense, not only against good taste, but also against ethics, against the truth of things.

When people use picturesque language to designate evil things or persons, it is acceptable creative technique. A person who engages in unfair competition may properly be called a *cutthroat* dealer, and a brothel might properly be called a *pigsty*. A writer with a truly Christian instinct will not call anything by an uglier name than it deserves—not even inanimate objects. Who observes this rule of both ethics and good taste need not worry about slang. Such a Christian would hardly call a person who through no fault of his cannot learn well, a *dumbbell*, or a girl who through no fault of hers is not beautiful, a *flat tire*, or a conscientious teacher a *stick-in-the-mud*.

Preface to a Closet Play

● James Kritzeck

Now, in awry,
bannerless pageantry,

an idea, no more sly
for cleaner linen,

frocks the naked minds.
Watch: its way is

sunsetward. Mankind's
credo-void new conscience,

full of mandrake eyes,
defines no old apocalyptic

six six six, decries
all further whying

made of wonder.
It ports the theft

of more than thunder:
of gods and devils

both together, finding these
have ceased to serve

as useful hypotheses.
Huic ergo parce Deus.

